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Greetings from

Eva and

Terence Kew

Christmas

1924.

THE AWFUL HISTORY
OF BLUEBEARD
ORIGINAL DRAWINGS BY
W. M. THACKERAY

WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
TEMPLE SCOTT
& A NOTE ON THE LEGEND BY
CHARLES VALE

PRIVately PRINTED
FOR JEROME KERN

Printed by Douglas C. McMurtrie, New York

THE INTRODUCTION

THESE delightful drawings by Thackeray, entitled by him, "The Awful History of Bluebeard," were found preserved in a little scrap-album which was presented to Mary Augusta Thackeray by her mother, on the child's eleventh birthday, March 26, 1841. They have never before been published, and they are reproduced now to engage the interest and arouse the amused appreciation of the many lovers of the great English novelist and humane humorist.

I have had no little difficulty in identifying the Mary Augusta of the album, but I have arrived at the definite conclusion that she was Thackeray's cousin, the daughter of Francis Thackeray, curate of Broxbourne in Hertfordshire and brother of Richmond Thackeray, the father of the novelist. While it is true that the records of the Thackeray family make no mention of a Mary Augusta, they do give a Mary, who was the daughter of Francis Thackeray. In his "Fragments of the Past," privately printed in 1907 by St. John Thackeray, a son of Francis Thackeray and a master at Eton, reference is made by the author to his sister Mary as being two years his senior. He does not call her Mary Augusta, but simply Mary. That

this Mary is the Mary Augusta of the album is evident from the following facts:

In the tiny scrap-album presented to Mary Augusta in 1836 as "the reward of good conduct," and now in the possession of Mr. Jerome Kern, are two entries—one in a child's handwriting, and the other in a mature hand. The former was evidently written by the child herself and is addressed "To St. John." It consists of six rhymed lines:

"Little boy
always try
To be your parent's joy,
never cry
But with me, ever prove
As gentle as a dove."

The "St. John" is, of course, Mary Augusta's brother, who was a boy of four years of age at the time. The second entry is a rhymed quatrain and is signed "F. T." and "M. A. T."

"Be good and kind my little Mary,
And never let your temper vary.
Remember how this gift you gain,
And every peevish word restrain."

The initials "F. T." are, no doubt, those of the child's father, Francis Thackeray, the uncle of William Makepeace, and the initials "M. A. T." are those of the child's mother, Mary Ann Thackeray, *née* Mary Ann Shakespear.

In the morocco bound solander case containing these two albums is a water-color drawing of Mary Augusta, a portrait of a ten months old baby, as the inscription on the back of the drawing informs us. At the time this drawing was made Thackeray was a young man of twenty, and had just left Trinity College, Cambridge, to travel in Germany and France, and to exercise himself enthusiastically with art studies. It will be remembered that Thackeray early nursed ambitions to become an artist, and his first writings which were illustrated by himself were published over the nom de plume, Michael Angelo Titmarsh.* Even as a boy at the Charterhouse School he was much addicted to drawing, and many of his school books have come down to us decorated with his efforts in this direction. His mother and stepfather urged him to enter the profession of the bar, but although he became a student of the Middle Temple and read law with a "pleader," his distaste for the legal profession was so strong that he discarded all pretence for its study when he attained his majority in 1832 and went to Paris to study art. His sojourn in the French capital, however, was short and mainly taken up with enjoying its pleasures. In December, 1832, he

* Is it only coincidence that the initials M. A. T. of Mary Ann Thackeray, Mary Augusta Thackeray and Michael Angelo Titmarsh are the same?

was back in London seeking channels in which he could find the work meet for his hands to do and fulfil himself. Art, somehow, offered no field in which he could acquit himself with any sense of fulfilment, and finding that his stepfather was connected with a weekly, the "National Standard," he took up journalism. But he never relinquished the hold art had on him.

While yet a youth Thackeray had evinced an unusual gift for burlesque, and several amusing parodies in verse have come down to us from this period of his life which testify to this gift. It was rather a satiric burlesque, which later burgeoned in his social studies and novels of contemporary life and manners. But the first expression of this satiric side of his nature found an art form for itself. There is no doubt he had a genuine flair for caricature, indulging his fancy in a frolicsome spirit only whenever occasion offered, yet unable to resist imparting to it a rather biting humor. When he came to publish his writings he took upon himself the task of interpreting them pictorially, and these illustrations form no small commentary on his judgments of the individuals he wrote about and satirized with his engaging humor. All his early works, and most of his important novels, with the exception of "Barry Lyndon" and "Henry Esmond," were thus illustrated by himself. Thackeray had an unbounded

admiration for the genius of George Cruikshank. He wrote an excellent essay on the man and his work. There is evident in Thackeray's drawings that spirit of caricature in both conception and treatment which is so characteristic of the great caricature artist of the nineteenth century.

The story has been told that when Mrs. Ritchie, the aunt with whom Thackeray lived when a child, found that her husband's hat fitted the little boy, she carried him in alarm to the popular physician, Sir Charles Clark. "Don't be afraid," Sir Charles told her, "he has a large head, but there's a good deal in it." There was so much in it, indeed, that it took thirty-eight years before it began to empty itself; and its owner was dead at fifty-two. What was Thackeray doing up to the age of thirty-eight? Idling, we are told—idling in travels, idling in pleasures at the French capital, idling in amusing himself with dabbling in art, idling in journalism, and idling in spending the five hundred pounds a year he had inherited. There must have been some virtue in this idling, for in the fourteen years of industry which followed Thackeray wrote himself into the glorious rolls of England's literature. Would that we had more idlers like the author of "The Newcomes" and "Vanity Fair." The truth is that a man of Thackeray's nature, keen in insight and loving in heart, must ripen slowly in beneficent sunlight,

that the acrid odors of the blossoming soul shall become transmuted into the vivifying perfumes of the flowering heart. It was thus that Thackeray ripened.

Even his drawings evince this process of burgeoning. These of Bluebeard's story which are dated "London, 1833," while they are, of course, the work of idle moments, are yet so fulfilled of Thackeray's humorous imagination and so indicative of his gift of caricature that they deserve a special place in the esteem of those who love the man and all the ways in which he expressed himself. Certainly they reveal that insight and knowledge of human nature which were later so richly embodied in his writings. It may seem absurd to cite these slight and fanciful delineations of a fable presented to a child for her amusement, as suggestive of the mentality of the author of "*Vanity Fair*"; but slight and fanciful as these drawings may be, they yet impart the same burlesque humor of reality tinged with a melancholy sarcasm which is so characteristic of Thackeray, the observer of human blindness to its own futilitarianisms. They give, even at the early date of their execution, the direction of the mental outlook of the man who was later made sad by affliction, but who recovered himself by a humor at once searching and kindly.

It was, however, in a frolicsome and humorous

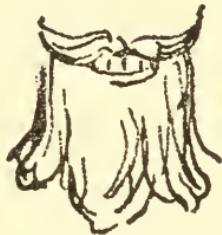
mood that Thackeray executed these seven drawings to illustrate the story of Bluebeard. The story and its moral must have touched his risibilities to a jocular resentment, for they are really very funny, and form an extravagant burlesque in sufficient detail to enable any one to follow the tale from its improbable beginning to its artificial conclusion. Although drawn with a pen in the sketchiest manner, every picture moves one to laughter, so happily and so amusingly is the burlesque realized. The faces and their expressions, especially those of Bluebeard and Fatima, are pictured in all the serio-comic possibilities of the situations in which the story places them. Thackeray, the young idler of twenty-two, must have enjoyed himself hugely both in making these drawings and in anticipating the pleasure they would give to the little girl to whom he sent them.

It is very interesting to note that the little album in which these drawings were pasted, seems to be the only evidence so far brought to light of Thackeray's relations with his uncle and his uncle's family. That Thackeray should have made the portrait of the child, Mary Augusta, and also sent her these Bluebeard drawings when the child had attained the age of eleven, would indicate that he had an affection for the girl and a strong attachment for his relatives in the Broxbourne vicarage. Apart, therefore, from the in-

trinsic merits of the drawings, they have the added interest of being a record of the great novelist's abiding and happy friendships with his relatives. They have a sentimental association which brings the man Thackeray very close to our hearts.

TEMPLE SCOTT

THE AWFUL
HISTORY
OF
BLUE BEARD



London -

1833

BLUEBEARD TEMPTS FATIMA BY GIVING HER
THE KEY OF THE LOCKED ROOM, INTO WHICH
SHE MUST NOT GO



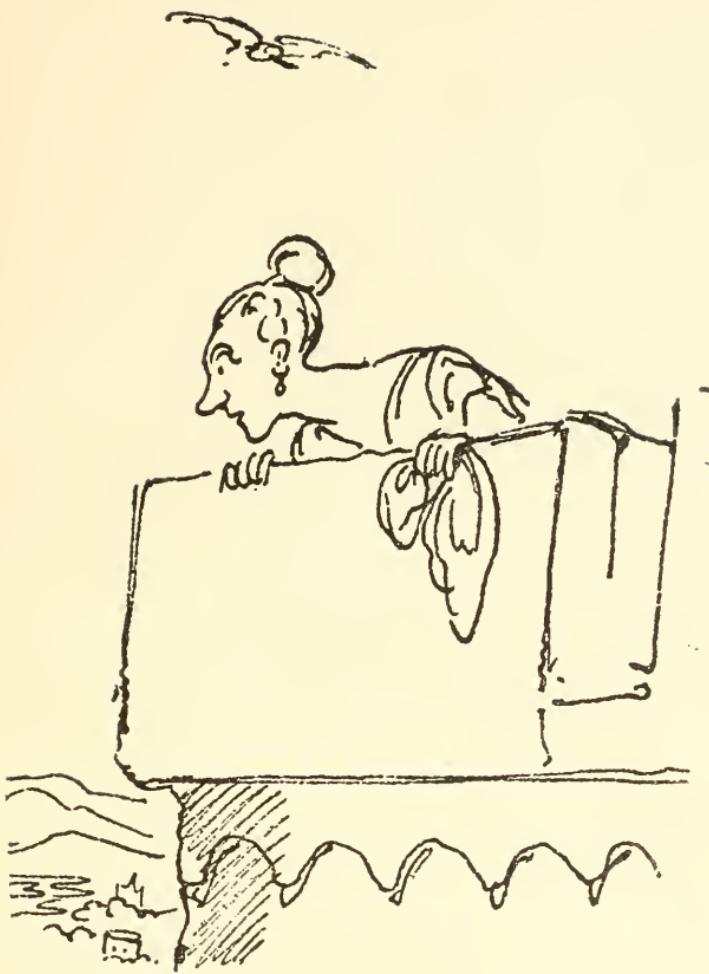
FATIMA'S DISCOVERY OF THE CONTENTS OF
BLUEBEARD'S LOCKED ROOM



BLUEBEARD, HAVING FOUND THAT FATIMA
HAS ENTERED THE SACRED CHAMBER, IS ABOUT
TO DEAL WITH HER AS HE DID WITH HIS OTHER
WIVES



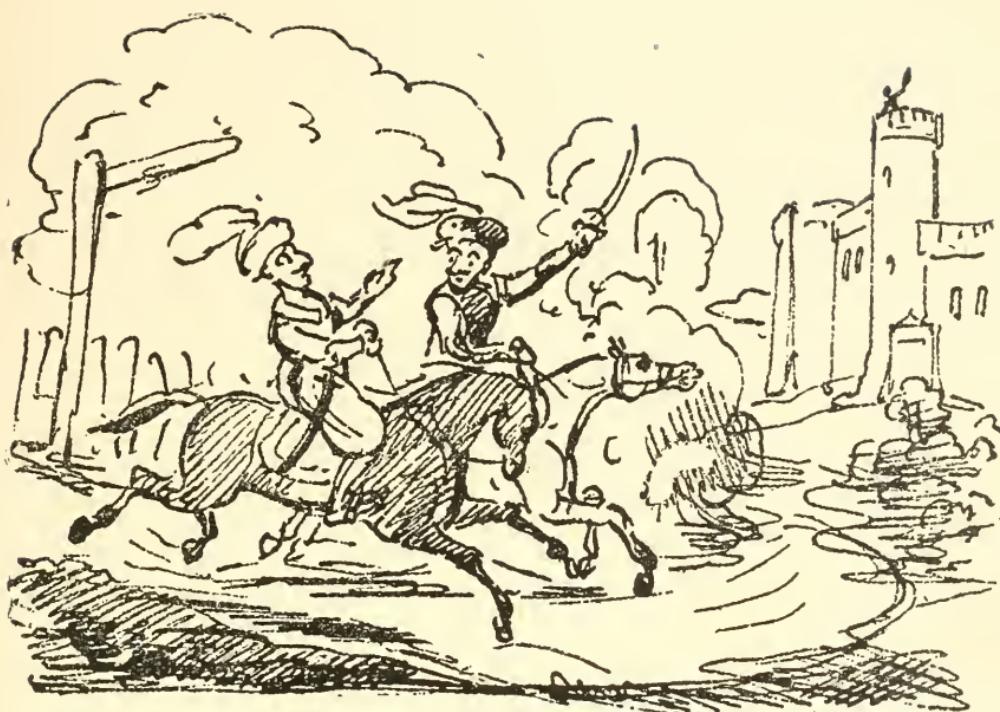
FATIMA'S SISTER, ANNE, ANXIOUSLY
LOOKING FROM THE TOWER FOR THE
RESCUERS



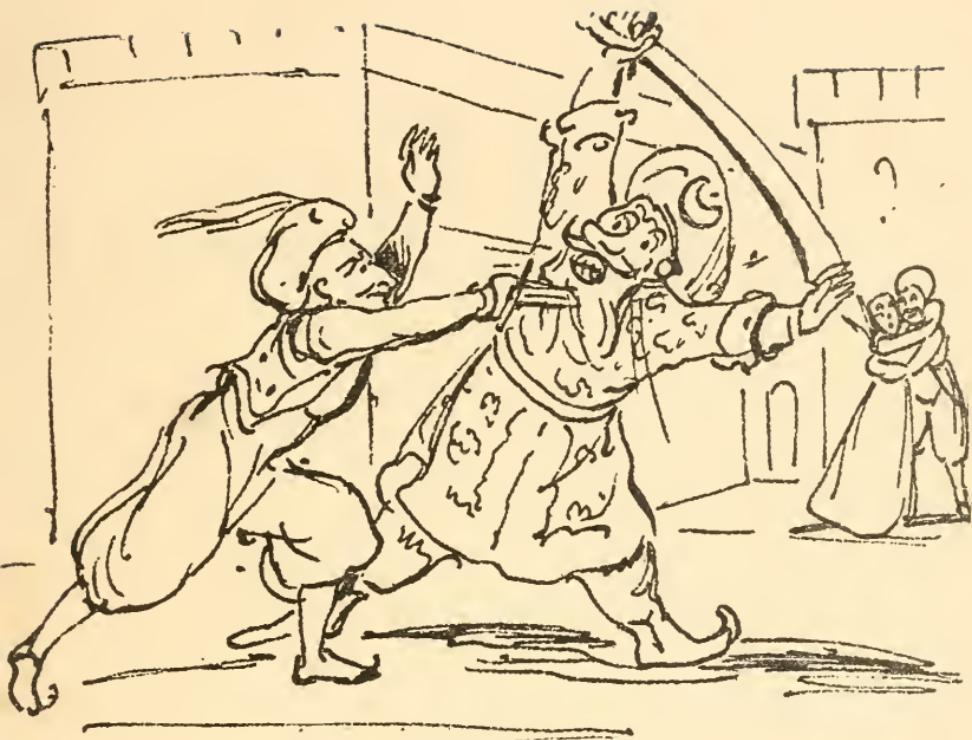
SISTER ANNE SIGNALLING THE RESCUERS



THE RIDE TO THE RESCUE OF FATIMA



THE DEATH OF BLUEBEARD



THE BLUEBEARD LEGEND

“This door you might not open, and you did”

EDNA ST. VINCENT MILLAY—“BLUEBEARD” (SONNET)

THE familiar story of Bluebeard found its way into English from the French of Charles Perrault’s “Barbe Bleue,” first printed in his “Histoires et Contes du Tems Passé” (1697). The Chevalier Raoul, whose imperishable sobriquet, of course, was due to the peculiar color of his beard, married successively six wives, who all mysteriously disappeared. Fatima, the undiscouraged seventh, was subjected to a singular test of obedience. Her husband, setting out on a journey, placed in her hands the keys of the castle, with full permission to wander where she pleased in the corridors and chambers, with the exception of one room, which must on no account be entered. Fatima, her loneliness nourishing her curiosity, naturally found the forbidden door irresistible: she unlocked it, and discovered the charnel chamber of her predecessors. In her terror she dropped the key, and was unable to obliterate from it the stain of blood. Her lord, returning, detected her disobedience (which he had anticipated) through the stain, and commanded her to prepare for death in five minutes. Her sister Anne, however, scanning

the horizon for possible succor, perceived horsemen in the distance. She signalled to them and they galloped to the rescue, arriving just in time to rescue their sister—for they proved to be Fatima's brothers—by slaying the implacable and sanguinary Bluebeard.

The rôle of the fictitious Chevalier Raoul has been assigned to various historic characters. The English Henry VIII has been suggested as the possible prototype: maritally and temperamentally, he seems qualified. In France the Bluebeard legend is especially associated with Brittany; but whether the traditions identifying the monster with Gilles de Rais, or with Comorre the Cursed, a Breton chieftain of the sixth century, were anterior to Perrault's time, cannot be satisfactorily determined. The claims of Gilles de Rais to the unpleasant distinction are still accepted locally in the neighborhood of the baron's numerous castles, particularly at Machecoul and Tiffauges, the chief scenes of his infamous crimes. De Rais, or de Retz, Marshal of France, fought stoutly against the English, and was Joan of Arc's special protector. One of the richest men in the realm, he kept open house, was a munificent patron of literature and music, and was himself a skilled illuminator and binder. He also indulged a passion for the stage, and the original draft of the *Mystery of Orleans* was probably written under

his dictation. His prodigality dissipated his wealth. He hoped to redeem his fortunes or misfortunes by alchemy, and also consulted necromancers, who promised to raise the devil for him. But he raised the devil himself, committing incredible atrocities. His servants kidnapped children, generally boys, on his behalf; and these he tortured and murdered. The number of his victims was alleged at his trial to have been 140, and even larger figures are quoted. He was eventually hanged (not burned alive, as is sometimes stated).

The less widespread identification of Bluebeard with Comorre the Cursed is supported by a series of frescoes dating from only a few years after the publication of Perrault's story. They were discovered in 1850, M. Hippolyte Violeau assures us in his "*Pélerinages de Bretagne*," during repairs to the chapel at St. Nicolas de Bieuzy dedicated to St. Tryphine, who in history was the wife of Comorre or Conomor: in legend she was decapitated, and miraculously restored to life by St. Gildas. The frescoes depict the Bluebeard story in five thrills—(1) The marriage; (2) the husband taking leave of his young wife and entrusting the key to her; (3) the forbidden door opened, and the corpses of the murdered wives hanging within; (4) the husband threatening his wife, while another female (sister Anne) is looking anxiously out of a window above; (5) the wife at the mercy

of her husband, with a halter round her neck; but the rescuers, accompanied by St. Gildas, Abbot of Rhuys in Brittany, arrive just in time to save the future saint.

Besides the French version of Perrault, there are tales of a similar kind in Straparola's "Piacevoli Notti" (1569) and in the "Pentamerone" of Gian Alesio Abbatutio. In his "Phantasus," Tieck developed the theme into a clever drama; Gétry, in his "Raoul Barbe-Bleue" (1789), gave it the setting of comic opera; the younger Coleman brought out "Bluebeard; or, Female Curiosity" in 1798; and Offenbach produced his *opéra bouffe*, "Barbe-Bleue," in 1866. The essentials of the story are found in various folklore tales, none of which, however, has attained the fame of Bluebeard. A close parallel exists in an Estonian legend of a husband who had already disposed of eleven wives, and was prevented from killing the twelfth, who had opened a secret room, by a gooseherd, the friend of her childhood. The story of The Third Calender in the "Arabian Nights" will readily present itself. The forty princesses were absent for forty days, but gave King Agib the keys of the palace before their departure. He had permission to enter every room except one. His curiosity (like Fatima's) led him to open the forbidden door, and mount the horse which he found in the chamber. The flying

steed carried him through the air far from the palace, and with a whisk of its tail knocked out his right eye. A similar misfortune—so precise was the horse's judgment of distance, and so powerful its retributive tail—had previously befallen ten other princes, who had warned Agib of the danger before he started.

The Bluebeard legend belongs to the common stock of folklore, and has even been ingeniously provided with a mythical interpretation. Its real significance obviously lies in its discouragement of intrusive curiosity; and its moral is priceless and timeless. Let no modern Fatimas or Agibs peer inquisitively into the secret chambers of the past: they may discover too much. Dead loves—murdered loves—may be multiple: but why disturb the skeletons? Sufficient unto the day—or the honeymoon—is its own tragedy, or its own comedy.

CHARLES VALE

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